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Cover Page Footnote

R. Chase Dunn is a student in the Communication and Advocacy M.A. program in the School of Communication Studies at James Madison University. The author originally wrote this essay in a class on rhetorical research methods. Special thanks to Dr. Matt Brigham for his support and guidance on this project.

“The Future is in Good Hands”: A Pentadic Analysis of President Barack Obama’s Farewell Address

R. Chase Dunn
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President Barack Obama’s farewell address serves as a symbolic end to an eight-year tenure as president of the United States. The standard themes in Obama’s public addresses have been hope and change, and the president continues to elaborate on those here. While describing accomplishments of his administration and thanking important people, Obama uses his last address as president to craft a narrative in three strands—past, present, and future—meant to inspire civic engagement in his audience. I use Burke’s dramatic pentad to discover how Obama rhetorically motivates his listeners towards this end. President Obama creates a sense of empowerment and audience identification with past American heroes by initially using purpose as a driving force, later emphasizing agency, and finally focusing on the agents who can accomplish the purpose. Obama’s farewell address illustrates the importance of presidential farewell addresses to shape the politics to follow, in this case by persuading citizens to engage in democratic processes.

Keywords: President Barack Obama, Farewell Address, Kenneth Burke, Dramatism, Pentad

Those who occupy the United States’ highest elected office have immense rhetorical power to effect political and social change on both a national and international stage. The president of the United States becomes an admired and despised public figure in the U.S., depending on one’s place on a political spectrum—especially today, an era of increased political polarization (Pew Research Center, 2014). The messages spoken by presidents are not only carefully constructed but also critically scrutinized by the news media, academics, and citizens. Therefore, American presidential speeches provide rhetorical scholars with rich texts that impact millions of lives. Certain rhetorical moments, such as the annual State of the Union Address, are highly ritualized and infused with particularly strong rhetorical potential. A president’s time in office is bookended by an inaugural speech and a farewell address, symbolically indicating the entry and exit of a particular person, serving as examples of these rhetorically-significant moments. The farewell address serves several rhetorical functions and can provide a sense of legacy to those who are leaving their post as president. The words spoken in this final

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speech to the public can a ripple effect for the political climate that follows.

President Barack Obama delivered his farewell to the nation on January 10, 2017. In his remarks, Obama crafts his legacy while also attempting to influence the political landscape of his successor by motivating his listeners to civic action. Obama motivates his audience to become civically engaged by creating a compelling narrative about the U.S. in which his listeners can identify with past American heroes and are invited to take part in the historical journey of continually improving the nation by using the tools of democracy. To better understand how Obama navigates this rhetorical moment, I will begin by surveying the current communication literature on public presidential addresses. In this review, I first note how scholars have examined the presidential farewell address both as a genre and as particular rhetorical moments. Then, I outline several ways President Obama's rhetoric has been studied and classified. Finally, I turn briefly to the use of Kenneth Burke's pentadic criticism in several relevant topic areas.

Literature Review

Rhetorical scholars have studied American political orations for many decades, and Lucas (1988) claims that the 1980s marked a time of increased study for these rhetorical moments, stemming from a revitalization of "the rhetoric of the platform" (p. 243), or traditional oratory, during Reagan's presidency. He calls for scholars to take advantage of the increased interest in the rhetorical criticism of speeches by conducting close textual analyses that contribute to both historical accounts of our country's public leaders and the understanding of rhetorical theory.

One specific type of public address, the farewell address, "occurs during a period in which presidents have greater than usual power to redefine the people and the presidency and by doing so bequeath a legacy to the country" (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p. 307). Situated between the naming of a president-elect and their inauguration, an outgoing president typically addresses the nation as president for a final time in the farewell address. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) identify several important functions of the farewell address: signifying a sense of change in leadership, reifying a relationship between president and citizenry, and giving a continuity to the role of the presidency which begins with a formalized inauguration speech.

Rhetorical analyses of farewell addresses have been diverse in style and scope. Thomas (1953) examines Aaron Burr's vice-presidential farewell address through a neo-Aristotelian lens, a rhetorical approach typically interested in understanding how speakers persuade their audiences to accept a particular message. The traditional analysis evaluates Burr's performance based on immediate and delayed responses from the audience in order to determine how well the speaker crafted his message. Medhurst (1994) examines President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address through Lloyd Bitzer's rhetorical situation approach, which argues for a focus on

the context and constraints that bound a message, explaining the historical context and describing both situational and personal exigencies at the time of the speech. Additionally, Szudrowicz-Garstka (2014) conducts a metaphoric analysis of President Ronald Reagan's farewell speech. She points to Reagan's most frequently used metaphors and explains how the president used these metaphors to reveal and accomplish his goals. Each of these essays offers vastly different methods that the authors use to examine the artifacts. However, the authors address the same broad questions: what rhetorical tools are these speakers using to pursue the main goals of farewell addresses, and how successful are they? The different methods employed illuminate (or select) certain aspects of the rhetorical moment while obscuring (or deflecting) others, acting as "terministic screens" (Burke, 1966, p. 45).

Recently, President Barack Obama joined the ranks of those who have delivered the presidential farewell address. Throughout his presidency, a large amount of research has analyzed Obama's rhetoric. Murphy (2015) offers an overview of Obama's rhetorical style, pointing out the president's intertwining of history and social change in his public addresses. As a result of this intertwining of history, "Obama sees himself as acting in history" (Murphy, 2015, p. 215) rather than simply citing history as a point of reference. Additionally, scholars have investigated Obama's rhetorical contributions to political discourse (Bostdorff, 2017; Kienpointner, 2013; Steudeman, 2013), foreign policy and war (Cram, 2017; Heo & Park, 2016; Reeves & May, 2013), and race in America (Aden, Crowley, Phillips, & Weger, 2016; McPhail & McPhail, 2011; Perry, 2017).

Two particularly important speeches helped propel Obama to the presidency—his 2004 keynote address to the Democratic National Convention and his 2008 "More Perfect Union" speech. Given their importance, scholars have analyzed the rhetorical strategies at work in these pieces. First, Rowland and Jones (2007) offer a narrative analysis of the keynote address and argued that Obama sought to recast the American Dream from a Republican to a Democratic narrative. By focusing on the concept of an "audacity of hope," Obama "create[s] a narrative that balance[s] personal and societal values" (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 434). In his "More Perfect Union" speech, Obama addressed concerns about his race, and his relationships with prominent Black leaders. Dilliplane (2012) outlines the rhetorical challenges of history and Blackness that Obama faced in trying to address a White audience. Obama employed a rhetorical strategy based on balancing two interlocking themes of American greatness—moving "toward a more perfect union" and "out of many, we are truly one" (Dilliplane, 2012, p. 134)—as an effective mechanism to overcome his challenges. In other words, by emphasizing a mission of positive change in the U.S. and a sense of unity in diversity, Obama skillfully addressed the racial challenges he was facing.

After Obama won the election in 2008, he began his eight-year term as president with a formal inauguration address. Here, Obama established

“a rhetorical blueprint of his presidency that recovers and recasts the cosmopolitan strand of the American civic religion” (Frank, 2011, p. 606). In other words, Obama worked to both challenge and embrace two separate traditions of underlying religious values in the U.S.: the founding Christian myth established by George Washington, and the American heritage of religious and racial patchwork. In analyzing this speech, Frank (2011) uses Medhurst’s notion of signature (a melding of rhetorical genre and situation) and Burke’s dissociation (a technique of reframing oppositional binaries) to explain how Obama recasts these historic traditions and finds a balance between them.

In this wide-ranging and substantial scholarship, common threads emerge that begin to describe Obama’s rhetorical style. He explains his theories of historical and social change, works to recast ideas that seemed previously incompatible, and strategically balances those opposing ideals. Additionally, themes of race and religion typically characterize his rhetorical style. Existing scholarship might lead us toward the conclusion that Obama uses similar strategies in his 2017 farewell address. However, because of the speech’s relative recency, analyses that attend to the speech on its own terms are still pertinent as we grapple with its potential rhetorical effects. Given the rich tapestry of Obama’s rhetorical artistry, we should employ the aid of previous analyses but remain open to the possibility that Obama’s rhetoric may innovate/adapt in particular ways for the purposes of this address.

Countless scholars have embraced Kenneth Burke’s method of pentadic criticism to better understand a broad range of rhetoric. For instance, the pentad has been used to explore various American political speeches (Blankenship, Fine & Davis 1983; Ling, 1970), religious rhetoric (Rountree, 1994), and popular media (Sealey-Morris, 2009). Additionally, scholars use Burke’s pentad as a method for analyzing presidential addresses (Birdsell, 1987; Fay & Kuypers, 2012; Koehn, 2008). Finally, scholars have approached the speeches of President Barack Obama through use of the dramatistic pentad (Liu & Street, 2009). No prominent rhetorical analyses have used pentadic criticism to examine farewell addresses, however.

Method

Kenneth Burke’s dramatism is a well-known and widely-used approach for exploring rhetorical artifacts. In his book, *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke (1969) opens with the poignant question, “What is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (p. XV). Burke spends the rest of the book exploring that question. Specifically, he expands on both Aristotle’s work on narrative, as well as his own theory of dramatism. Further, he discusses five distinct questions that exist when one describes what a person does and why: “what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)”

(Burke, 1969, p. xv). He calls the combination and relationship of these five rhetorical elements the “pentad.”

The most striking contribution of Burke’s theory is his proposition that humans act out of purpose rather than simply move as bodies in space; however, what is important is that “whether or not we are just things in motion, we think of one another . . . as *persons*” (Burke, 1966, p. 53). That is, dramatism gives us a heuristic for understanding rhetorical representations of human motives (Rountree, 1998). Thus, the pentad illuminates not only people’s actions, but also how we attribute meaning to those actions (McGeough & King, 2016). For Burke, it may not be knowable whether a person’s actions are actually driven by a particular motive. His method is instead interested in the motives that rhetoric constructs and/or represents. Burke’s pentad gives rhetorical critics a means of identifying the motives of a speaker by examining how the speaker constructs his/her message about the topic or action in question. Thus, the dramatic pentad is more concerned with discovering multiple perspectives on people’s actions rather than with the absolute truth of a situation or a definitive proving of a particular internal psychological state we might term “motive” (McGeough & King, 2016).

Previous work has used the pentad to illuminate Obama’s rhetoric. For instance, Liu and Street (2009) analyze the pentadic ratios of Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech on issues of race to discover the political motive of the piece. Given that Obama’s rhetoric has previously been explored by looking at his narratives through Burke’s dramatic pentad, it is useful to explore President Obama’s farewell address to continue to grow and develop this emerging line of scholarship. In his farewell speech, Obama crafts a chronological story about America, his own life and legacy, and the responsibility of U.S. citizens; applying pentadic criticism to these stories illustrates perceived motives for Obama’s telling of them.

Scholars generally follow three broad steps to analyze a piece of rhetoric with the pentad. First, they identify how the rhetor constructs each of the five pentadic terms through a close read. By searching for emergent patterns in the construction of the terms, the critic can determine which of the terms is dominant within the text. Next, the critic looks for the presence of pentadic ratios—terms that are in relationship with one another. By identifying the relationship or dominance of one term over another, the critic is able to better understand the rhetorical moves made by the speaker through a primary two-term ratio. For example, one might find that the primary ratio of a text is scene-act. In this case, the rhetor has foregrounded the scene (where it was done) as a way to make sense of the act (what was done). Lastly, the scholar analyzes what the primary pentadic ratios of the text reveal about the motive of the speaker. Importantly, any one of the terms of the pentad can be dominant over any other, and the dominance can shift within a single text (Ling, 1970; McGeough & King, 2016). Burke (1969) believes that ratios are ubiquitous and central to our understanding of motives. Thus, scholars

are able to explore the initial question provided by Burke (1969): “What is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (p. XV).

For this essay, I begin my analysis of President Obama’s farewell address by examining the narratives that he uses as the vehicle of his subtler political motives. I have analyzed the text to locate and identify which pentadic terms dominate each narrative and which pentadic terms remain relatively consistent. Next, I identify which pentadic ratios allow the best understanding of each narrative. Finally, I analyze the pentadic ratios in the narratives in order to discover President Obama’s greater motivations and the rhetorical strategies he employed to attempt to accomplish his goals.

Context

Barack Hussein Obama II, the 44th president of the United States of America, occupied the country’s highest elected office from 2009 to 2017. He began his political career serving in the Illinois State Senate in 1996 and remained there until 2004. In 2002, he gave a highly circulated speech opposing the Iraq War, which helped him in 2004 when he won the race for the United States Senate. His popularity increased greatly after a nationally renowned keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 (Nelson, 2016). Senator Obama defeated John McCain in the 2008 presidential race, becoming the first African American president in United States history. In 2012, President Obama began his second term after defeating Governor Mitt Romney.

At the end of the Obama era, a tense and polarizing race for the presidency emerged. Donald Trump, an unlikely business-figure-turned politician, won the Republican nomination amidst a dense field of 17 candidates. Running against the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, few believed that Trump had a chance of winning (Gatehouse, 2016). For many in the U.S., Trump’s election came with serious dismay; Trump spent his campaign “stoking racial fears, promising border walls and religious bans, vowing to jail his opponent, [and] declaring the outcome ‘rigged’ before a single ballot was cast” (Gatehouse, 2016). Many of his campaign promises became especially frightening for minority groups in the U.S. such as Muslims and undocumented immigrants. Trump’s supporters, however, saw this as a chance to “drain the swamp,” a popular phrase of Trump’s to describe removing career politicians from the American political landscape (Munsil, 2016). To these supporters, this was a victory over political correctness and a win for the “silent majority” (Borchers, 2016). Trump ultimately won the election, and as Obama’s exit drew near, it was time for his farewell address.

On January 10, 2017, President Obama delivered his farewell address live on national television. Obama presented the speech at McCormick Place Convention Center in his hometown of Chicago, breaking from the traditional White House speech, to a crowd of 18,000. In addition to that

crowd, an estimated 24 million people viewed the speech live on television (Collins, 2017). McCarthy (2017) points out that nearly six in ten Americans viewed Obama favorably near the end of his second term, the clear majority. Leading up to the day of the address, news outlets predicted a forward-looking speech that would not only highlight Obama's accomplishments, but also encourage civic engagement and connect personally to Chicago (Davey, 2017; Korte, 2017).

Obama's address presented a symbolic end to the eight-year tenure of his presidency and his decades-long career in public office. The speech also helped shape the terms of his presidential and public service legacy. He outlined his accomplishments, addressed the nation's hopes and fears as the swearing-in of a controversial new president drew near, and described his expectations for himself and all of the U.S. as he prepared to join the civilian ranks.

Analysis

The Pentad

Obama uses complex rhetorical strategies, including Burkean identification, to accomplish a specific goal. He creates a narrative about the U.S. that is meant to not only engage but also persuade his audience into action. Overall, Obama's rhetoric attempts to convince his audience to become civically engaged by inviting them to participate in a larger American story in which historic American heroes work toward the common purpose of forming a more perfect union. He seeks to prove that democracy is a viable tool to accomplish that purpose and encourages his audience to continue the legacy of those who came before.

The five elements of the pentad exist within any constructed narrative, and Obama's American narrative is no exception. He presents his story in three separate strands—past, present, and future. A specific pentad could be identified for each strand; however, a general pentad proves more useful for understanding how and with whom the audience is asked to identify. I will first seek to understand the consistent nature of these pentadic terms and then, in the next section, look at three pentadic ratios, aligned with the chronological divisions of the speech.

In the first strand, Obama describes the scene simultaneously as “the past 240 years” when our democracy was being formed, and “in the 60s” when Jim Crow laws were in effect. Similarly, he describes the first time Americans took flight “at Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral” while also describing the Great Depression and World War II. In the second strand, Obama discusses “the last eight years,” and describes the state of the nation during that time. Additionally, the second strand involves the present moment of the farewell address, as evidenced by Obama's initial focus on the unusual location of the speech in his hometown of Chicago. Finally, the third strand includes

the time period being ushered in “in ten days” when the new administration takes office, but it is also, more generally, “the future.” In sum, the overall scene of the piece is the historical and ongoing socio-political landscape of the United States, located in the specific moment of Obama’s address.

As with scene, the agent can be split into the three categories of past, present, and future, but the agents in each category fit a much broader description as well. When discussing the past 240 years, Obama includes several different groups of people: the founders, patriots, pioneers, slaves, immigrants, refugees, women, workers, civil rights leaders, intelligence officers, law enforcement, diplomats, and men and women in uniform. In essence, Obama is beginning to define and describe his vision of what it means to be “American.” Then, in the strand of the narrative situated in the present, the president again lists several groups of people: young graduates, new military officers, scientists, Wounded Warriors, doctors, volunteers, and children. He then summarizes this list by naming them all, “ordinary Americans.” Starting with a large list of different people in the first strand, Obama has begun narrowing that list down in the second strand. In the third strand, Obama condenses these groups into a single word. He says, “we in fact all share the same proud type, the most important office in a democracy, citizen. Citizen. So, you see, that’s what our democracy demands. It needs you.” Here, Obama summarizes the common thread in each strand of the American narrative: The agents throughout our nation’s history have been citizens from any upbringing or occupation who are working toward a common goal.

The scene and agent elements change throughout the three strands while retaining a unifying theme, but the remaining elements of the pentad are relatively stable. The purpose is captured best by the notion that we are working toward “a more perfect union.” The president broadly describes this purpose: “It’s the beating heart of our American idea—our bold experiment in self-government. It’s the conviction that we are all created equal, endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Here, equality, liberty, and freedom emerge as central tenets that fuel an American ethic of constant betterment. In other areas, this purpose of forming a more perfect union is described as a “change,” making the U.S. a “better, stronger place,” “making people’s lives better,” “fixing” the negatives, and “continually try[ing] to improve this great nation of ours,” but all of these reveal the same goal of social and political change in the U.S. To provide more specificity, Obama spends significant time describing the challenges the U.S. faces which impede progress towards forming a more perfect union:

A shrinking world, growing inequality, demographic change, and the specter of terrorism. These forces haven’t just tested our security and our prosperity, but are testing our democracy as well. And how we meet these challenges

to our democracy will determine our ability to educate our kids and create good jobs and protect our homeland.

The president then systematically discusses each of the mentioned challenges with parallel structure, explaining the longevity of the issue, the work that has been accomplished, and the work that still needs to be done. By structuring his argument in this way, Obama demonstrates a continuity of purpose throughout each strand of the narrative. Further, he clarifies for the audience what that purpose is by describing what would obstruct it. In sum, the president intends to characterize the United States' purpose as continual social and political change to make the country "more perfect."

Similarly, Obama keeps the agency consistent in every strand. He states clearly and concisely, "We, the people, through the instrument of our democracy, can form a more perfect union." For Obama, democracy is an instrument to which all U.S. citizens have access and can use in furthering the purpose of social and political change. Throughout the speech, he clarifies the strengths and weaknesses of democracy as a tool. For example:

The work of democracy has always been hard. It has been contentious. Sometimes it has been bloody. For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion.

Additionally, Obama mentions that the democracy was designed to encourage "healthy debate [in which] we prioritize different goals and the different means of reaching them." Importantly, Obama shows the effectiveness of this agency throughout each strand of the American narrative. Whether it was the "call to citizenship" that led the American heroes through the past 240 years, the warning that change "depends on our participation" and "accepting the responsibility of citizenship" in the present, or the encouragement to future generations "to carry this hard work of democracy forward," Obama makes it clear that democracy is a lasting tool that can be used over the entire course of the American narrative—including the future.

Finally, the act in President Obama's American narrative is civic engagement. He believes that "change only happens when ordinary people get involved, and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it." The vision of the U.S. that Obama advocates for is one in which ordinary citizens from all walks of life can actively participate in the improvement of the nation through use of democratic structures. He claims, however, that this is only effective if "all of us, regardless of party affiliation or particular interests, help restore the sense of common purpose that we so badly need right now." For Obama:

Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift. But it's really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the people, give it power. We, the people, give

it meaning — with our participation, and with the choices that we make and the alliances that we forge.

The president argues that the ultimate act that ought to characterize U.S. citizens is civic engagement in order to carry forward the basic premises of our government. The three strands—past, present, and future—contribute to a constructed American narrative that began hundreds of years before the audience was born, was continued by that audience in recent years, and will be continued by the audience as the next administration takes office. By describing this narrative, Obama attempts to motivate the audience into an active participation in the democratic process that leads to positive social and political change.

Pentadic Ratios¹

Identifying the ratios and relationship between separate elements of the pentad within a piece is a useful way to understand how the pentad is functioning as a rhetorical tool to pursue the speaker's goals. As previously noted, some texts may indicate toward more than one ratio (and/or pentad), while in others, a particular ratio (and/or pentad) may transform over the course of the text. Accordingly, within each strand of Obama's American narrative, he places weight on different ratios. The different ratios that he emphasizes provide valuable insight into both how Obama wants Americans to see the world and the rhetorical strategies that he uses to motivate his audience to accept this viewpoint.

The purpose-agent ratio dominates the first strand (regarding the past). Consistently, in discussing the United States' past, Obama describes how a common purpose has animated numerous different actors, and he goes on to name them. For instance, he says, "It's what led patriots to choose republic over tyranny, pioneers to trek west, slaves to brave that makeshift railroad to freedom." In this case, "it" refers to the common purpose of working toward a more perfect union, and Obama claims that this purpose is what drives patriots, pioneers, and slaves. In a less explicit way, Obama draws attention to the purpose-agent ratio by describing those who challenge the purpose of positive change and the agents who stop them:

Our law enforcement agencies are more effective and vigilant than ever. We have taken out tens of thousands of

1 Importantly, each pentadic ratio has resulting implications for the other three terms. The first strand of Obama's narrative (past) emphasizes the pentadic ratio of purpose-agent, and that ratio then influences scene, act, and agency. As an example, in the narrative, Obama casts the scene as America's sociopolitical landscape, and he calls attention to the numerous and complex problems the country faces (e.g., racism). The primary ratio of purpose-agent causes this scene and all of its challenges to fade into the background. Strategically, this causes the audience to momentarily set aside concerns about America's struggles, helping to foster feelings of pride and accomplishment. The focus on positive affect functions to motivate the audience to action.

terrorists, including Bin Laden. The global coalition we're leading against ISIL has taken out their leaders and taken away about half their territory. ISIL will be destroyed. And no one who threatens America will ever be safe.

Here, the law enforcement agents counter threats to an idealized "America" and its purpose. Those agents, by extension, advance and are driven by the United States' purpose. For Obama, the past is characterized by a common purpose driving historical American agents.

When presenting the second strand, centered in the present day, Obama emphasizes an agency-purpose ratio. He mentions the coming inauguration of the succeeding administration, and he recognizes that there are challenges that come with this shift of power. He tells the audience, however, that when it comes to facing those challenges, "We have everything we need to meet those challenges" because we have "our youth, our drive, our diversity and openness, our boundless capacity for risk and reinvention." He goes on to say that these tools will "help restore the sense of common purpose that we so badly need right now." The president notes the values of democracy and argues that they will drive forward the improvement of the nation. As Obama states, "If something needs fixing, then lace up your shoes and do some organizing." In other words, the agency of democratic organizing accomplishes the purpose of fixing what is broken.

In the third strand, Obama transitions to an agent-purpose ratio. While the first strand employs a purpose-agent ratio to demonstrate that a common purpose animates a collective agent, this agent-purpose ratio emphasizes the nature of the agents in pursuit of a common goal. This transition is best represented by this excerpt:

It falls to each of us to be those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy. Embrace the joyous task we have been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours because, for all our outward differences, we in fact all share the same proud type, the most important office in a democracy, citizen.

Here, the president begins to address "us," the "guardians of our democracy" who hold the office of "citizen," and he says the responsibility of forming a more perfect union is ours. Then, changing to the second person, Obama says, "So, you see, that's what our democracy demands. It needs you. Not just when there's an election, not just when your own narrow interest is at stake, but over the full span of a lifetime." The president is not only emphasizing the agent, but he is also ensuring that his audience understands that each one of them *is* the agent. Finally, Obama turns to the youngest generation, who will affect the future of the nation. He tells them that "constant change has been America's hallmark," and he emphasizes that they have the ability to positively impact the nation: "You are willing to carry this hard work of democracy forward. You'll soon outnumber any of us, and I believe, as a

result, the future is in good hands.” For Obama, the future is secure as long as young people understand and engage in the purpose that has united America since its conception.

Discussion

Throughout his time in the public eye, Obama has been known for a rhetorical style marked with hope and change. Previous scholars have examined the ways that Obama has used narrative and other rhetorical strategies to balance seemingly incompatible ideas in order to recast and reframe a stratified political culture under his leadership (Frank, 2011). More work can be done, though, to explain how Obama’s rhetoric has been marked with a call to political action from everyday citizens, and the implications of this shift of focus from what his rhetoric and action can do to what *citizens* can say and do to transform the world themselves.

Applying Burke’s dramatic pentad to Obama’s farewell address allows us to explore how Obama’s rhetoric encourages continued participation in the political process by helping his audience identify with past American heroes. Obama tells a chronological story in which he places the listener in an historical, democratic experiment that is “America.” He begins his speech by making the purpose of creating a more perfect union the primary driver of the narrative with a secondary focus on the historic agents of that purpose. Then, the president shifts his focus to the agency that allows work toward the purpose—democracy. Finally, he emphasizes the importance of the agents—in this case, American citizens—in realizing the United States’ purpose. While Obama explicitly details the American purpose as a primary driver of change in the first strand, that purpose becomes the secondary driver for the next two strands. This switch helps ground political and social action as an underlying thread that unites historic, current, and future Americans while empowering them with the tools of democracy.

Both short-term and long-term implications exist surrounding this farewell address. In the short-term, Obama reframes the audience’s perspective to reassure them that *they*, not the coming administration, are the key players for democracy. This reframing is necessary because many Americans were incredibly fearful about what Donald Trump’s presidency would mean for American policy both at home and worldwide; many felt disempowered in the wake of Trump’s electoral victory. The shifting pentadic ratios embedded in this speech’s rhetorical activity help the audience see that they share a common purpose with countless American heroes from the past who have consistently risen up to America’s challenges. The ratios also show how U.S. citizens can (and already do) effectively use the agency of democracy in the present. This creates an identification with past American heroes, increasing the self-efficacy of his audience to create positive social change moving forward.

Obama skillfully attempts to garner future civic engagement in his listeners. This attempt is useful and necessary because we do not always feel as if we are important agents of social change in our everyday lives. Obama's argument to his listeners, however, is that every ordinary American is a critical part of the larger American narrative and can constantly change the nation for the better using the proven tool of democracy.

Another short-term implication of the speech is that Obama seeks to effect change on and frame the political landscape of the succeeding administration. In the weeks immediately following the inauguration of President Obama's successor, millions of people organized protests and demonstrations nationwide to communicate their stance on several of the challenges that President Obama mentioned during his address—economic inequality, women's rights, race relations, and more. Establishing whether any causation between Obama's words and the action of those citizens exists would be difficult, but it seems unmistakable that, at a minimum, Obama and these citizens are tapping into a common reservoir of purpose and belief. Future research could continue to examine the role of presidential farewell rhetoric in creating specific action at the onset of the next presidential administration.

Long-term, Obama's farewell address was about not only preparing Americans for his exit and Trump's entrance, but also calling for a refined vision of future political action to make the country a "more perfect union." Understanding how persuasion of public engagement within a democracy functions rhetorically is particularly important in the political culture of the U.S. right now. Characterized by increased polarity and stratification, the nation is facing several serious tensions. On either side of the aisle, Americans are concerned with who should hold power—rich or poor; Black, White, or Brown; women or men; and career politicians or everyday citizens. People everywhere feel overlooked and unheard, and they are increasingly unwilling to collaborate with the perceived "other side." Obama displays a belief that democracy and public engagement are sufficient to overcome these struggles. Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad provides a useful tool to understand how rhetoric motivates people in general. Rhetorical scholars can use this tool more specifically to explore the ways that rhetoric can be designed to motivate civic engagement in the political process by examining the messages that politicians like Barack Obama are sending and how they are received by the audience.

Conclusion

President Barack Obama, a skilled speaker and politician, has made a career of enacting political change by motivating his constituents. After a long tenure as a public servant, and a turbulent presidency, Obama spoke to the nation for the last time as president in his farewell address. In this speech, Obama creates an American narrative meant to inspire and empower his

listeners to become civically engaged and change the nation for the better. My analysis suggests major rhetorical strategies of identification through narrative at work to accomplish this goal, based on the insights offered by Kenneth Burke's dramastistic pentad.

Additionally, this analysis offers new insight into the function of the presidential farewell address as ritualized rhetoric. As previously mentioned, Campbell and Jamieson (2008) identify several functions of the farewell address, including a symbolic end to a presidency, a reifying of the president-citizen relationship, and a continuity and closure for the office. Obama's address works towards these functions, but also focuses primarily on affecting the U.S. political landscape at the level of the citizen. As opposed to functions that seem centered on the effect of the farewell address for the president, this function moves the focus to the effect of the address on the everyday lives of the U.S. public. This shift may have important political implications for rhetoricians, communication scholars, and political scientists. Future research may examine the relationship of a farewell address to direct political action of citizens at the onset of a new administration. Researchers could also examine how that action constrains the political power of an incoming president.

If we, as a nation, are to learn how to collaboratively work together to form a more perfect union, we need more and more people involved in the political process at every level of government. Burke's pentad teaches us that a strong link exists between rhetoric and action. Further, rhetoric has real power to either bring people together to solve the problems that we face or create an increased division in the political culture. We, as citizens, have a responsibility to be thoughtful consumers of the political and social rhetoric we encounter. We have a responsibility to carefully craft our own rhetoric to encourage and increase the engagement of our fellow citizens in the American political process. And, ultimately, we have a responsibility to enact the change we desire for the world, for—as Obama reminds us—the future is in our hands.

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